

Chris' Corner

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On the Poor Side of Town

<https://creatingcontemplation.files.wordpress.com/2023/01/mark1.jpg>

Billy Ferguson stars as Mark Cohen in "Rent" at the Omaha Community Playhouse

Come experience a year in the lives of the people of a poor neighborhood in NYC. This is *Rent* and it is currently playing at the [Omaha Community Playhouse](http://www.omahaplayhouse.com) (<http://www.omahaplayhouse.com>).

I'll make this short and sweet. This is the season's first masterpiece. Good night, everyone!

Oh, very well. I'll share some more.

I actually had never seen this show before tonight and did not know any of its songs, though I did remember this show being extremely hot property back when it debuted in 1996. Little did I know what I had been missing.

Jonathan Larson wrote an incredible tour de force with compelling stories and amazing songs. I detected influences from Andrew Lloyd Webber and Shakespeare mixed in with Larson's heart and vision. His show is also very prescient with its powerful theme of inclusiveness which makes it very much a show that fits in today's environment.

I've occasionally referenced theatrical kismet when a show gets all the right elements in place to create an indelible piece of magic and this show has that from top to bottom. Superior musical direction. A perfectly cast ensemble. Dead on the mark direction. Flawless technical elements. Lovely voices and brilliant choreography. Spot on acting. There's even a little audience participation (and I mooed with the best of them).

Stephen Santa is on fire with this show. Not only is his direction pluperfect, but it's one of the very best, if not the best, pieces of staging I've ever seen. Santa uses the entire theatre with his actors joining the audience on the risers to make us part of the story. And "Contact" is, without question, the single most perfectly staged moment I've ever witnessed. Santa also led his actors to superlative performances. Never did he let them cheat or shortchange an emotional moment and this show has them in droves.

This show has the truest ensemble I've ever seen. By that I mean that each role holds a crucial level of vitality and necessity and everyone gets a moment to shine at some point. Some stellar performances come from Evelyn Hill who is larger than life as Maureen, a performance artiste trying to fight the good fight against a lot owner attempting to evict the homeless. Brandi Mercedes Smith is incredibly effective as the no nonsense lawyer, Joanne, who is in a tumultuous relationship with Maureen. DJ Tyree is not only eminently likable as Tom Collins, but he has a voice like a warm and comfortable quilt and an unbelievable vocal range from soaring tenor to deep baritone. I defy you to listen to him sing "I'll Cover You" and not start crying.

Isa Gott has one killer Playhouse debut as Mimi. Gott displays some masterful versatility with her depiction of the old before her time teenaged exotic dancer/junkie further bolstered by her sizzling chemistry with Jesse White's Roger. In one moment, she's hungrily eyeballing Roger as she flirts with him while trying to get a candle lit. In another, she's emotionally gutted by Roger's constant distrust and pushing her away. Her reactions are always natural and right on the money and her jones for heroin when overpowered by stress is palpable. Gott also has the voice of an angel and just smacks emotional pitches out of the park with the flirty "Light My Candle", the seductive "Out Tonight", and the haunting "Without You".

Over the past few years, Jesse White has made his mark as one of Omaha's finest musical actors and is in especially fine fettle as Roger. There's a real nimbleness to White's portrayal of the recovering junkie musician as he leaps from emotional beat to emotional beat and those beats swing huge as Roger can go from upbeat to broken on the turn of a dime. White even had a remarkable way of making his eyes seem hollowed out to show his former dependence on drugs and his sickness from battling HIV. White shows Roger's weariness, his distrust, his reluctance to open up emotionally, and even his hopefulness, especially as he struggles to write one great song before he shuffles off this mortal coil. White has got a sensational voice as he fights to achieve that "One Song Glory" which he certainly does with a phenomenal take on "Your Eyes".

Personally, I saw the character of Angel as the lynchpin of this group of friends. His indefatigable joie de vivre serves as the fuel for everyone's happiness. When he hits the scene, the day gets a little brighter and when he's not around, things go awry. In Wayne Hudson II's hands, the role is a piece of acting gold. Hudson's Angel just eats life with shining teeth. He never seems to have a bad day and is always willing to be a supportive rock for those struggling emotionally. Hudson is incredibly sweet in the role and he and Tyree's Tom Collins make for an adorable couple. Hudson has got a nice light tenor which he uses well in "You Okay, Honey?" and the gut wrenching "I'll Cover You".

Mark is the closest thing this show has to a central character as he serves as narrator and I got the sense that the show might have been the great documentary he was trying to create. Billy Ferguson gives a top rate performance as the hopeful documentarian. Ferguson's take on Mark is that he's always searching for something. He's searching for that great documentary. He's searching for that sense of connection in a community. Heck, he's even searching for the rent money. It's interesting to watch Mark's inner turmoil as he battles suppressing his artistic vision to the expediency of money when a tabloid show wants to employ him after his footage of a riot hits the news. At the same time, he is tormented by watching friendships fray and decay in Act II and fears being the only one of his group left alive as nearly all of his other friends suffer from HIV and AIDS. Ferguson shows some emotional musical versatility of his own as he

commiserates with his ex's new girlfriend over her selfishness and libido in "Tango Maureen", snarkily sticks it to a former friend in "La Vie Boheme", and frets over his future and the potential deaths of his friends in "Halloween".

Jim Boggess was in especially rare form (and that's saying something!) with his work on this show. Not only was his conducting of the orchestra infallible, but his molding of the singers was of tremendous quality with their beautiful harmonies and blended voices. I'd also like to tip my hat to the band as Colin Duckworth, Mark Haar, and Vince Krysl did yeoman work. But I especially want to laud Jennifer Novak Haar's keyboard work as it just transported me to another realm.

Aaron Derell Gregory supplies some phenomenal choreography for the show. What I liked best about it was its spontaneity. It never felt staged. It always seemed so natural as if the characters just felt like dancing for the sheer fun of it. And "La Vie Boheme" is easily the most infectious piece of choreography I've ever seen as I almost succumbed to the temptation to get up and start dancing with the cast.

Nora Marlow Smith has designed a fantastic set as it looks like a dingy street in NYC with the placement of ladders and lights really feeling like the industrial loft of Mark and Roger. I especially liked the rotating crosswalk which Santa skillfully used to represent emotional distance between characters in key scenes. Andrew Morgan's properties add that sense of poorness with discarded TVs and is enhanced by Janet Morr's protest graffiti. Darrin Golden adds some technical wizardry with snowfall, confetti, and balloons. Josh Wroblewski's lights add something special especially with the Christmas lights and the street corner light used when the homeless comically deride another Christmas season. The sounds of Tim Burkhart and John Gibilisco suck you in even before the show starts with the horn honks, bustling traffic, and police whistles pulling you into another morning rush hour in NYC. Lindsay Pape's costumes well communicate the bohemian lifestyle of the denizens of this neighborhood. But she also gets to show off some other personalities with the rigid business wear of the TV exec trying to hire Mark and the matronly wear of the mothers of Mark and Roger when they're leaving voice mails.

Truly, this was an extremely satisfying night of theatre and one of the top five musicals I've had the pleasure of watching. It's a nearly perfect story with wonderful characterizations and unforgettable music. Do yourself a favor and get a ticket yesterday because this one is already selling out.

Rent runs at Omaha Community Playhouse through March 19. Showtimes are Thurs-Sat at 7:30pm and Sundays at 2pm. Tickets are on sale now, starting at \$45 and may be purchased at the Box Office, by phone at (402) 553-0800, or online at [OmahaPlayhouse.com](http://www.omahaplayhouse.com) (<http://www.omahaplayhouse.com/>). Due to strong language and some mature themes, parental discretion is advised. The Omaha Community Playhouse is located at 6915 Cass St in Omaha, NE.

Photo by Colin Conces

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